

September 27, 2024

Dan Ruben, Executive Director
Equal Justice America
3007 East Boundary Terrace
Suite 201
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Executive Director Dan Ruben,

This summer, I had the privilege of interning at the ACLU of Southern California as part of their Jails' Project. This experience was both transformative and educational, and allowed me to get a firsthand look at the harsh realities that incarcerated individuals face in the ***largest jail systems*** in the United States. Los Angeles County jails, like many other county correctional facilities, are plagued by overcrowding, inadequate healthcare, violence, and systemic neglect. My work as part of the ACLU's team allowed to hold the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD) accountable for these conditions and ensure that incarcerated people are afforded the protections to which they are entitled.

I. Advocating for Gender-Affirming Care and Protections Based on Sexual Orientation

Los Angeles County jails, like many other carceral institutions, have a long history of failing to provide proper care and protections for LGBTQ+ individuals, especially transgender people. During my internship, I collaborated with the ACLU of SoCal's Gender Equity and Reproductive Justice team to reinstate gender affirming care for two individuals who had wrongly been denied or withheld this medical care. Similarly, I assisted in requesting LASD to change the name of one of our clients in LASD's databases to their chosen name. This in turned allowed jail staff to refer to them with the name that best reflects their true gender identity.

I also worked on cases involving protections for individuals who faced violence or harassment based on their sexual orientation. Many LGBTQ+ inmates in Los Angeles County jails are placed in general population housing units, where they are vulnerable to abuse from both inmates and jail staff. As such, I worked to ensure that multiple incarcerated people were correctly classified as members of the LGBTQ+ community and, consequently, assigned to a jail unit where they could be open about their sexual orientation without fear of violence.

II. Addressing Disability Issues in Los Angeles County Jails

In Los Angeles County jails, individuals with disabilities face significant barriers to receiving the accommodations to which they are entitled under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). As part of my work in this area, I received and reviewed complaints made to our office by people with disabilities and, subsequently, filed grievances on their behalf requesting LASD to provide the required accommodations.

Moreover, I conducted jail visits to interview clients with disabilities to learn more about the conditions in the inside and monitor the extent to which jails were complying with the ADA

and our individual requests. If we learned of a new a person needing accommodations during our interviews, I requested LASD to provide them with an ADA classification screening and appropriate accommodations. Lastly, I assessed restroom, cell units, and dorm spaces to ensure that they had the required assistive accommodations for individuals with wheelchairs.

Cases in this area left a particularly long-lasting impression on me and further underscored the urgent need to transform jails and prisons. One of my cases involved an individual who suffered an accident earlier in his life that deteriorated his ability to walk. He, therefore, became reliant on a walker and cane to move. Despite have a demonstrated record of using these devices inside the jail, they were taken away one day. As such, he was forced to not only rely on his unit mates to move, but he was also forced to walk to his doctor appointment by foot, causing him an enormous amount of pain. In another case, a person was forced to miss his court appearances multiple times because the elevators in the facility did not work or because there was no ADA-transportation available and, therefore, he could not be transported consistent with the ADA.

III. Fighting Excessive Use of Force Inside of Jails

Another key aspect of my work at the ACLU of SoCal revolved around monitoring LASD's compliance with reforms following the *Rosas v. Luna* settlement, which was a pivotal case aimed at addressing widespread deputy violence against people in the county jails. I actively reported to LASD allegations of excessive use of force made to our office by incarcerated people and demanded a thorough investigation consistent with *Rosas*. Moreover, I reviewed use of force packages alleging excessive use of force and reported findings to an oversight committee. These findings were directly reported to the Los Angeles County's board of supervisors for the purpose of holding staff official accountable.

IV. Conclusion

Without the assistance of EJA, I would have not been able to continue my commitment for prisoners' rights. I'm extremely grateful for this grant as it gave me the opportunity to return to my hometown and advocate for members of my community who have been historically criminalized. I look forward to continuing to work with EJA to ensure that people inside of jails are provided the protections they deserve.

Sincerely,

Angel Mendez-Flores